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ABSTRACT

Adult educators are recognizing that factors in the learning environment related to psychological, social, and cultural conditions exert a powerful influence on learners' growth and development. Current discussions on learning environments have broadened to include the need to confront issues of sexism and racism, interlocking systems of power and oppression, and social justice. In creating an inclusive learning environment, addressing institutional and societal levels is important, but the most significant level is the selection of appropriate materials and methods that address the characteristics of learning group members. Working toward the goal of creating an inclusive learning environment may give rise to some issues, especially those related to power and control. At the most basic level are the traditional power relations that exist between learners and teachers. The need to maintain a balance between being learner centered and learner positive can also be an issue. Suggestions to guide the development of inclusive learning environments include the following: acknowledge that all individuals bring multiple perspectives to any learning situation; recognize that a learner's claimed identity will be in response to many contextual factors that position the individual politically; reflect and value the experiences of learners; pay attention to power relations inherent in knowledge production; and acknowledge the power disparity between the teacher/facilitator and students. (Contains 14 references.) (YLB)

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Inclusive Adult Learning Environments

by Susan Imel

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I've just changed completely from when I first (entered school). I used to take this little African body and force it into this European square peg. And you know, it didn't work. I kept trying to do it and trying to change who I was and tried to fit in. . . . When I finally decided to be the person that I am, I started feeling more comfortable. (Taylor 1995, p. 84).

Ever since Malcolm Knowles (1970) introduced the concept of *learning climate*, adult educators have been aware of how the environment affects learning. As reflected in the words of the returning woman student quoted here, however, adults may still find some learning environments to be inhospitable. Rather than learners trying to change who they are so that they will "fit in," adult educators must create learning environments in which all learners can thrive. Following an overview of changing conceptions of adult learning environments, this *ERIC Digest* describes what it means to create an inclusive learning environment, examines some related issues, and presents some guidelines for structuring inclusive learning environments.

Adult Learning Environments: Changing Conceptions

In introducing the concept of learning environment, Knowles (1970) suggested that activities conducted prior to and during the first session could "greatly affect it" (p. 270), including promotional materials and announcements; activities designed to assess learner needs prior to the event; physical arrangements; and the opening session, including greeting, learning activity overview, introductions, and treatment by the instructor. More recently, adult educators are recognizing that factors in the learning environment related to psychological, social, and cultural conditions also exert a powerful influence on the growth and development of learners (Hiemstra 1991).

Current discussions on learning environments have broadened to include the need to confront issues of sexism and racism (Hayes and Colin 1994), interlocking systems of power and oppression (Tisdell 1993b), and social justice (Shore et al. 1993). This broader understanding of factors that affect learning is leading adult educators to consider how they can create environments that address "issues of power that are inherent in cultural diversity, whether that diversity is based on nationality, race, class, gender, sexual orientation, disability or some other factor" (Merriam 1993, p. 58).

Developing Inclusive Learning Environments

How can inclusive learning environments be created? Tisdell (1995) suggests that a learning environment needs to attend to inclusivity at three levels. A truly inclusive learning environment should "(1) reflect the diversity of those present in the learning activity itself in the curriculum and pedagogical/andragogical style; (2) attend to the wider and immediate institutional contexts in which the participants work and live; and (3) in some way reflect the changing needs of an increasingly diverse society" (p. 4). Because learners "do not live in a vacuum" (ibid.), addressing institutional and societal levels is important, but the most significant level is the selection of appro-

priate materials and methods that address the characteristics of learning group members.

Addressing the diversity of learners by selecting appropriate curriculum and course content is a critical aspect of inclusiveness. The understanding that all groups—including those that are dominant—have culture or ethnicity must form the basis for the curriculum (Shore et al. 1993). The knowledge base of all groups needs to be represented in the curriculum (hooks 1994). Although "many groups share in the subordinate social status and selective discrimination that 'minorities' often implies, each cultural group has its own history, values, and customs" (Ross-Gordon 1993, p. 53), and each must be considered in choosing resources and learning activities. It is a mistake, for example, to assume that general information on women also applies to women of color.

Based on recent research and theory building, a different conception of pedagogy is emerging, one that is appropriate for an inclusive learning environment. Termed "new pedagogy" by Taylor and Marienau (1995), this way of teaching is more inclusive and it incorporates (1) the validity of the student's experiences as well as support for the emerging self as a focus of education; (2) the contextual nature of knowledge, including the relationship between the learner and his or her knowledge base; and (3) the notion that learning can be a transformative process. The new pedagogy employs diverse practices such as reflective journal writing, storytelling, role playing, small group discussion, and metaphor analysis (Caffarella 1992), and it addresses the learning styles and preferences of groups represented in the learning activity.

No one definition or prescription for inclusiveness will fit every learning environment. What happens in any learning environment in terms of inclusiveness will depend on the adult educator's personal experiences with various systems of privilege and oppressions, the educational context, and the participants and their characteristics (Tisdell 1995).

Some Related Issues

Working toward the goal of creating an inclusive learning environment may give rise to some issues, especially those related to power and control. At the most basic level are the traditional—but unequal—power relations that exist between learners and teachers. In conventional educational settings, teachers and learners have expectations about their roles; the teacher is seen as the source of knowledge and consequently is ascribed power; the learner is perceived as the receiver of the teacher's knowledge, sometimes described as an empty vessel waiting to be filled. However, inclusive learning environments work to "dismantle ways of operating . . . that unnecessarily privilege teachers' formal knowledge and experience" (Shore et al. 1993, p. 12), and this power shift can be unsettling for both teachers and learners.

Power relations between and among learners are also likely to change as the environment becomes more inclusive. Groups of learners or individuals who may have felt silenced previously

will feel freer to become part of the discussions and to challenge existing truths and biases. As differences are recognized and more voices are heard, the notion that a learning setting should be a "safe harmonious place" will be tested (hooks 1994, p. 30).

The need to maintain a balance between being learner centered (placing learners at the center of a learning activity) and learner positive (providing positive experiences for the learner) can also be an issue in inclusive learning environments. Related to questions of power and control, this issue refers to the need to examine the extent to which being "learner centered" may diminish the efforts to be inclusive. Although learner centeredness is a hallmark of adult education, and "may help resolve some of the authority issues inherent in . . . teacher-centered programming," it tends to make "invisible certain kinds of relationships among students, among workers, and among students and workers . . . [especially those based on] differences in race, sex, class background, abilities, sources of income, immigration status, and so on" (Lloyd, Ennis, and Atkinson 1994, p. 25). Tisdell (1993a) shows how the dissonance between being learner centered and learner positive might occur in a description of how one teacher's efforts to create a learner-centered classroom were thwarted; after the teacher yielded her power and control to the learners, a group who considered themselves the enlightened dominated the class and effectively silenced other learners.

Because a primary goal of inclusive learning environments is to equalize power between teachers and learners and among learners in the learning setting, issues related to power and control are the most complex. Acknowledging and discussing these issues can be a first step in addressing them.

Creating Inclusive Learning Environments: Some Guidelines

As noted earlier, depending on the instructor, the learners, and the context, each learning environment will differ in terms of inclusiveness (Tisdell 1995). Although these variations make it impossible to be prescriptive about creating inclusive learning environments, the following suggestions can be used to guide their development:

- Acknowledge that all individuals bring multiple perspectives to any learning situation as a result of their gender, ethnicity, class, age, sexuality, and/or physical abilities
- Recognize that since identification with social groups is multiple and complex, [a learner's] claimed identity will be in response to many contextual factors that position the individual politically
- Reflect the experiences of learners, both as individuals and as members of particular social groups, and value these experiences through their use as the basis of learning and assessment (Shore et al. 1993, p. 3)
- Pay attention to the power relations inherent in knowledge production
- Be aware that participants are positioned differently in relationship to each other and to the knowledge being acquired
- Acknowledge the power disparity between the teacher/facilitator and the students (Tisdell 1995, p. 90)

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